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The imp of the implicit in “Tea with Mrs. Bittell” by V.S. Pritchett

Jacques Sohier

1 The category of the implicit in language has the characteristics of a will-of-the-wisp that hovers in the distance but displaces itself or even vanishes when it is approached too closely. Folded in the sinews of language, the implicit is something like a mischievous imp that slips the noose when one tries to pin it down too long to make it say what it means exactly by its being so devious. This imp without further ado is made to explicate itself to clear ambiguities of all kinds. Philosophers and linguists, of course, have had considerable success in making this imp sit pretty while they had it out with it. It comes out of their labour for example that the field of the implicit can tentatively be circumscribed by rules, principles, involving speaking subjects in a dynamic process fraught with contradictions or uncertainty between, “Utterer's Meaning, Sentence-Meaning, Word-Meaning” or even to quote the title of another Gricean paper, between “Presupposition and Conversational Implicature”. The assumption of this paper is that the functioning of language in a literary text is not dissimilar from what happens in so called ‘natural’ language, though one cannot strictly equate ‘reading’ with ‘conversation’.[1]

2 In natural occurring dialogues there is a constant to and fro movement to ascertain or even exploit the implicit part of language. In literary texts that form a unit of reading the situation is the same but different. What first comes to mind is that the author cannot normally be called upon to say what he/she means by his or her text. The writer wrote the text in the first place to say what he/she means so it is rather like turning the author into an all knowing subject to have him/her say what he/she intended to say. We shall rather assume that in a literary reading of the implicit the reader has a part to play, for as L. Sterne said, “no author who understands the just boundaries of decorum and good breeding would presume to think all”.[2]

3 In this amicable relationship, we will concentrate on the working of the implicit to see that it can take many guises and dimensions that produce the pleasure of reading that is born out of play with meaning. To do so we will read a short story by V.S. Prichett and have “Tea with Mrs. Bittell”, as the title has it.[3] To organize the analysis we shall study

the implicit in relation with J. Lacan's tripartite scheme, the real, the imaginary and the symbolic and shall couple each register with the implicit in an attempt to associate reading with language and desire.

The real implicit

4 The category of ‘the real implicit‘ when dealing with fiction sounds misleading. The category of the ‘real‘ for Lacan is related to trauma, to the body, as when he says that the real resists symbolization. The real does not need us being self-sufficient and without gap or fissure.[4] Since the real is beyond language the category of the ‘real implicit’ seems a ‘real’ misnomer leading nowhere but to a paradox. But if we read Lacan *with* Freud we could rescue the monstrous category by saying that the real implicit lies below the conscious-preconscious system in the unconscious itself thus luxuriating with other mind-stuff in the simplicity of its illicit indeterminacy. This could mean that in the text itself the real implicit is where meaning becomes so unsure of itself that it loses its head and starts flying in all impossible directions. And this might be the case for the character as well as for the reader in different moments and places in the text. Indeed, there are segments of the text that figure this real implicit. At the end of the story, Mrs Bittell seizes her anxiety by its handle so to speak and empowering herself of a brass table lamp beats up the robber she has caught red-handed stealing in her own bedroom. The whole text gradually works up to this climactic outcome through an astute narration that informs the reader of important moments in the life of Zuilmah Bittell. It is astute because through several scenes of dialogue between the wealthy seventy-year-old lady and the working class young man she condescends to invite to her flat for tea, the reader is made to assemble disparate elements and to connect them together to make sense of this surprising end of the story. We will quote from this end of the tale to comment on it:

> She had often, in her quiet way, thought of what she would do if someone attacked her. She had always planned to speak gently and to ask them why they were so unhappy and had they forgotten they were children of God. But a terrible thing had happened. She had wet herself, like a child, all down her legs. Red with shame, as he rushed and fell and was trying to get up, she tipped the piano stool over as he jumped at her. He stumbled over it. And this was the moment she had often imagined. She became as strong as History; she picked up the brass table lamp and bashed him on the neck, the head, anywhere. Not once, but twice or three times. And then fell back and fainted. (502)

5 From the point of view of the character, the real implicit can be the gap between what she has consciously determined to do and what, as the text puts it, “she had often imagined” and therefore belongs to the world of fantasy. Facing an attacker, Mrs Bittell thought she would be able to reason it out through solicitude and an appeal to a common humanity. The real, however, is not amenable to dialectics but is rather explicitly threatening and brutal as all she hears from behind the closed door which locks the robber in is, “I'll break your bloody neck, you silly old bitch” (501). This unambiguous threat is a case of real explicit. On the other hand, the real implicit is the effect a fantasy of hers becoming real produces on her. Confronted with an assailant, Mrs Bittell lets go of her conscious scenario and is taken in hand by her body that has her micturating through fear. Feeling the loss of her dignity, Mrs Bittell takes revenge by bashing the robber.

6 There the real implicit is revealed as belonging to the character endowed with substance and complexes. But the end is foreshadowed by the very structure of the text. If we read

this end as a 'passage to the act', then the reader has to connect discrete signals that build up along the story. The statement “She became as strong as History” can thus be read against the layering of frustration Mrs Bittel experiences. She was once beaten by her husband, “he had once hit her with a bedside lamp” (486). A similarity between Rupert the robber and her husband is suggested. Rupert is presented to her as a friend of a friend but then ends up robbing her while she is away. On the other hand, her husband became a parasite, using her wealth to his own ends, “[he] had helped himself to her money for years and left her contemptuously and gone to live only a mile away across the park to play bridge with his military friends, and die” (487). In many ways Mrs Bittell historicizes her present self by seeing herself as a victim, “When her husband left her she had seen herself as a woman ruined by generations of reckless plunderers of land, putting down rebellion, fighting wars, gambling and drinking away their money, building big houses, losing their land to lawyers and farmers, grabbing the money of their wives and quarrelling with their children. She saw herself with unassuming pride as the victim of history” (489). It must be one of the ruses of the unconscious that the pride of being a victim reverses itself into the desire to do justice to oneself for having been abused. From being the one who is beaten up, Mrs Bittell becomes the one who beats up and thus momentarily reverses her subjective position by acting out the programme contained in her name, “I tell Mrs Bittell that she was a Battle,” he confided in a loud voice. “Bataille”. (495). This reversal also exemplifies the working of the imaginary realm which has both implicit and explicit dimensions.

The imaginary implicit

7 On the face of it it would seem that Lacan's definition of the imaginary as being the domain of illusion, deception, images and generally seduction leaves little room for the implicit dimension of language. Implicitness conjoined with the imaginary tends to reduce to a minimum one of the functions of language, that of clarifying and separating. When Mrs Bittell thinks “He was human and alone, as she was” (494), differences end up as being minimized and displaced in favour of the similar and the selfsame. When Mrs Bittell invites a young man from a tea counter for tea in her flat she strives deliberately to naturalize her condescension behind a self-serving mask of benevolence: “She liked to say it was “inconvenient”, on the general ground that a lady should appear to complain beautifully when doing a kindness to someone outside her own class” (483). This is the first statement of the short story and it serves to place the character ideologically within the world of the affluent as opposed to that of the young working-class man. The lady goes out of her way to meet the deprived Sidney who is thankful for the consideration he receives.

8 The imaginary is given full sway as Mrs Bittell invites the young man to her flat. In the privacy of her surrounding, intimacy is rapidly established. An identity of interest is created by making the doorman an object of suspicion and dislike. Sidney is looked down by the doorman when first entering the flat and so is made to feel class conscious while Mrs Bittell feels the doorman failed to keep his place when he ganged up with the other tenants who complained about her playing the piano, “Even the doorman had turned against her” (486). From that moment, Mrs Bittell feels the doorman is manipulative about her presence/absence in the flat, “She supposed, she said, Sidney had seen, in the entrance hall to the flats, the board with a sliding slot indicating whether tenants were

“In” or “Out”. She was sure, she told Sidney, that the doorman changed her slot to “Out” when she was “In”, and to “In” when she was “Out”. Sidney came to life when she said this; he exclaimed that the slot said “Out” when he had arrived. Mrs Bittell had always loved a suspicion and she was impressed to find someone who shared one with her” (486). Mrs Bittel is impressed by someone who in fact reinforces in her a paranoiac interpretation of others’ intentions.

9 The relationship intensifies and becomes an ideal dyad as the two characters begin exchanging life’s experiences and opinions. Sidney speaks to her about the illness of his father and about his living conditions with his mother and sister in a high-rise block where people “unscrew your front door or saw it off when you go out, and pinch the TV” (484). Mrs Bittell stops short of confidences but comments on her family’s pictures which decorate the walls of her flat and on the little wrongs of life that have allowed her to play the piano between two and four in the afternoon. On the basis of such exchanges a common knowledge of each other is built and this enables the creation of an imaginary representation of the other. Mrs Bittel sympathizes with Sidney’s feelings and judgments, “did Sidney feel too that sincerity, honesty, consideration, were wearing thin in modern life?” (489). Then she adds, “I know what you mean,” said Mrs Bittell, who did not.” The interesting proposition that carries onward the discreet charm of style is the second one, “who did not”.[5] It explicitly negates what the character has just affirmed in her locution. One could develop the truncated part of the sentence as follows: “I know what you mean”, said Mrs Bittell who did not know what *he* meant.” But an implicit pronoun suggests itself, “Mrs Bittell did not know what *she* meant”. We cannot rule out hypocrisy in Mrs Bittell or more generously her social manner replete with phatic statements encouraging empathy. The first reading is however more relevant as it is more in keeping with the generally ironical trend of the tale. As Mrs Bittell shows compassion and understanding, an authoritative voice comes out of the blue to deny this understanding to the character. It is amusing for the reader to be explicitly hailed by such statement that makes us feel superior to the character. As Freud has shown in *Jokes and Their Relation to The Unconscious*, such ganging up on someone is bound to trigger a yield of pleasure as Mrs Bittell is depicted as believing she knows the other to be disconfirmed by the narrative voice in the same breath.[6]

10 It could be argued that it is this belief that one can understand the other that the story dramatizes as well as satirizes. The opening of the story foregrounds this innocence that the writer explicitly exploits as he contrasts the differences in age of the two protagonists, their social world as well as the generational gap there is between them. The story constrains meaning along a decoding of the main character’s innocence. This allows for semantic indeterminacy that is rigorously orchestrated. For instance, V. S. Prichett exploits the comic aspects underlying the meeting of two socially opposed characters:

> “Slate mines are cold. I don’t like the cold”. There was a long pause. “The deeper you go, the colder it gets,” he said.
> Mrs Bittel said her sister Dolly had had the same impression of the catacombs outside Rome, even though wearing a coat. (484-5)

11 Their world experiences are sharply contrasted and find a common ground about the very low temperature that functions as a signified expressing insurmountable social distance. Even though conversation unites speakers, what linguists have called encyclopaedic knowledge separates them:

> Mrs Bittell was offering him a second cup of tea from her silver teapot. She held the cup over the slop basin.
> “I forget, d'you like to keep your remains?”
> He thought about this; a funeral appeared to him to be passing through his mind”.
> “It's O.K. Mrs Bittel,” he said. (485)

12 The two characters attribute different meanings to the expression “to keep one’s remains”. What is meant as a direct question referring to the situation at hand starts in Sidney a lengthy cognitive process with uncertain outcome: “He thought about this [...] It’s O.K. Mrs Bittel”. Since Sidney also talks about the illness of his father which was caused by his working in a slate mine (“Slate is killing my father”), death anxiety could be seen as latent in Mrs Bittel's discourse. It is unnamed as such but it is nevertheless intended for the reader’s pleasure of decoding.

13 Among the different codes that make a text, Roland Barthes named this the hermeneutical code that the reader follows to extract a semantic continuity and an interpretation from the story. To a large extent, the text frames the meaning the reader is to construct. However we wish to determine the collective meaning derived from the terms of “catacombs”, “keeping one’s remains” and falling ill from the dust inhaled in a slate mine, all these textual segments coalesce into the signifier ‘death’ that could be called the implicit signifier of this conversational piece.

14 There is in this short story a severely controlled implicit. Several segments of the text can be heard to resonate scandalously as for example, “doing a kindness to someone” along with further along the text the sudden arresting realization: “It came to her that Sidney was a man” (493) not excluding the segment “And seeing his unhappy look, she gave him a light kiss. Sidney was shocked by the kiss” (496). An illicit implicit reading might be suggested. Generally, reading can be associated with scopic pleasure and the desire for seeing the forbidden which is a sublimation of the desire to see or fantasize the primal scene. As Charles Grivel said “Reading is accomplished in the expectation of the signs of scandal”.[7] The scandalous suggestiveness of the opening statement of the short story is that Mrs Bittell could transpire to be a belated Lady Chatterley about to act out her sexual revolution by “complaining beautifully when doing a kindness to someone outside her own class”. This illicit reading of the situation seems to cross the mind of one of her visitors, Mr Ferney who is “on the verge of a belated search for a wife” (495). He intrudes on Sidney and Mrs Bittell and he construes the presence of Sidney as a threat to him:

> “He used to work at Murgatroyd and Foot’s,” said Mrs Bittel. Terrible stories he’s been telling me. I'm trying to help him.”
> “Oh, I see,” said Mr Ferney, relieved, and passed his cup. “What's he after? You do slave for people. I wish you'd slave for me.”(496).

15 In this one word, ‘relieved’, a complete construal of the situation is expressed. As Mr Ferney finds Sidney having tea with Mrs Bittell, he considers Sidney as a potential erotic rival. His relief on hearing Mrs Bittell's explanation is also highly revealing of an implicit assumption. This assumption could be explicated by a cultural implicit in the character. According to this kind of ideological implicit, ladies are socially expected to show concern in an attempt to boost morale or the spiritual nature of the lower classes. It is their social duty to do so, or so it was. The showing of kindness to a young working-class man is therefore limited to its social relevance but linguistically the sentence, from the point of view of Mr Ferney, seems to call for “an explicature”, an explicitly communicated assumption meant to clarify an ambiguous situation. Instead of imagining an old lady who pays for sex or romantic attention, it is much more appropriate to read this moment

within the context of an old bourgois lady who is and has been alienated by patriarchy and is about to become so again.

16 The indeterminacy is nevertheless inscribed in the text and it causes this *Pleasure of the Text* R. Barthes has commented upon which is born out of the sharing and contrasting different intentions, opinions, values.[8] The illicit reading cannot surface for long because the tentative implicit romance narrative that would work as illicit subtext is controlled and led into the margin of the text in what can be called a wild implicit or more precisely a ‘subplicit’, “[when] reverberations of meaning (be they intentional or not) are triggered”.[9] The reader cannot countenance for long such a reading because Mrs Bittell is repeatedly and very explicitly made into a pious woman, a firm believer, a regular churchgoer. Contrary to her atheistical sister Dolly, Zuilmah Bittell is presented as saying “The younger generation is hungry for faith” (483). Her preoccupation is to soothe and guide along the way, “Sidney was reaching towards the Light” (489). She regularly goes to church and regularly falls asleep during the sermon, but she prays vigorously, “I must pray. I must not let the Devil get hold of me, she thought. Sidney and Rupert are children of God made in his image and likeness” (493). The religiosity of this character is the object of intense irony from the narrative voice because her explicit faith in God is associated with ingenuousness in sexual matters. Mrs Bittell’s naivety is explicitly foregrounded as when we read that she has “innocent blue eyes”. The short story writer gleefully exploits such innocence that deceives her into a kindness that will ironically turn against her. There is a lack of symbolic knowledge in the protagonist that belongs to a category we could call the symbolic implicit.

The symbolic implicit

17 The symbolic is one of Lacan’s fundamental categories and it cannot be dissociated from his other two orders, the real and the imaginary, since an understanding of the functioning of subjectivity comes from a distinction of the three orders.[10] Although the symbolic cannot simply be equated with language itself because the symbolic is the realm of underlying structures in general, it is nevertheless closely linked to language without which this very word, the symbolic, would have no signified. And with underlying structures that tend to escape conscious control but can produce powerful effects in the real, one finds again the field of language that has different shades or implicit dimensions. Just like symbolic structures, implicitness can escape the consciouness of all speaking and listening subjects. Saying what one means and understanding what is meant involve innumerable linguistic and cultural choices that can thrive on ambiguities and misunderstandings of all kinds. The implicit can therefore connect with the symbolic in the vast field Lacan called the Other, the unconscious and language where processes like condensation and displacement look unfamiliar to the ego. Within this framework the implicit would be a part of signifying processes that the ego vaguely controls through inferences but, in the end, the imp splits its very self to become barely recoverable as it seeks a resting place. “Tea with Mrs Bittell” exemplifies this uncertain meandering travel of the implicit. For instance, the protagonist takes Sidney back to the door of her flat and before parting Sidney looks at a full length picture in the dim hall. On looking at Sidney as he looks intently at the picture, Mrs Bittell realizes something:

> It came to her that Sidney was a man. “How embarrassing”, she said. She imagined she had seen a hot, reddish cloud in Sidney’s eyes. He had gaped, mouth open, at

> the picture, and his mouth looked angry and wet. She had once or twice seen her wretched husband looking at the picture, mouth open in the same way, though (she remembered) he was short of money. (493).

18 As the association of the character shows, Mrs Bittell places Sidney in the same category as her husband, in the category of ‘man’ which she implicitly opposes to that of ‘woman’. The picture represents a naked Psyche and “Mrs Bittell had long stopped noticing that Psyche was naked, and if she had been asked, would have said that the figure was wearing one of those gauzy scarves that pictures of nymphs wore in books. She had never even thought of naked statues as being naked. Men, she supposed, might think they were––they were so animal”. The binary opposition––the ‘man-animal’ versus the ‘woman-spirit’––establishes two well defined symbolic positions. According to this binarity, the male gazer beholding a picture which represents a naked Psyche will be more interested in eroticizing the female body than in the art form itself. On the other hand, the female gazer will be denied subjective status to be instituted as the object of the gaze. This is what P. Brooks condenses by saying, “Viewing woman's body in a phallic field of vision”.[11] Mrs Bittell’s attitude conforms to this pattern as she looks at Sidney who looks at a naked Psyche. However, the short story displaces this stark opposition and goes on not only to destabilize the privileging of the masculine gaze for the eroticised female object in the picture but also to find the masculine uncertain of its position.

19 There is first some ironic intention meant in the fact that Mrs Bittell associated her husband's gaze at the picture with animal lust while it is not so much the value of beauty he is interested in as the financial amount he might derive from selling the picture, “’We'd get a tidy price for it at Christie’s’” (493), he says. Similarly, Mrs Bittell is presented as presupposing that her picture of Psyche as it is viewed by Sidney, is perceived by a male heterosexually desiring subject. This is what the tale questions through Mrs Bittell's innocence. The story dramatizes this failure in “communing with the unseen”, Henry James might have said, which ends with Mrs Bittell being robbed of her valuable Psyche by Rupert, Sidney’s friend. This failure in imagination is orchestrated in passages that can be seen as the sites that most stretch the implicitness of the text and therefore fully invite the participation of the reader. In one of the passages, Mrs Bittell looks at her Psyche in a very special way, “She herself had not “seen” the picture for years. It was glazed and was hardly more than a mirror in which she could give a look at her hat before she went out” (492). Mrs Bittell uses her picture of Psyche not for its decorative function since it is placed in a dim hall but for its useful function, to look at herself. Being used as a mirror for the self, the picture suddenly acquires an unlooked-for importance. It becomes the focus of a knot of implicit significations that radiate throughout the short story. One of these significations is that Psyche, “the goddess, the nymph, I believe. the Greek legend. Psyche ––The soul” as Mrs Bittell explains to Sidney, implicitly shows the extent of Mrs Bittell’s alienation in patriarchal society. The female body not only becomes eroticised by the painter, it is also mystified as Greek mythology is used. The myth attempts to mask the erotic undertones of the picture and the character is made to see only the transcendant side of the portrait, missing the immediate aspect of Psyche in its real bodily presence.

20 As a representation of the self, Psyche aptly shows an implicit split between the self-image and the imaged self but also between gender and desire. The picture is described as “scarcely visible except for the face” (491) and since Mrs Bittell “had not really looked at it since she was a girl”, Psyche becomes the expression of a failure to symbolize the

imaginary with all its repercussions. On going out from Mrs Bittel’s flat, Sidney is reflected in Psyche, “As he picked his raincoat he saw himself reflected in a glass of a very large old picture, the full-length portrait of a girl, it seemed, though scarcely visible except for the face” (491). Since this passage is a focalisation of what the character sees of himself in the mirror-like picture of Psyche, the identification of Sidney with a female body is implicitly made. This in its turn suggests the homosexuality of Sidney and of Rupert, something Mrs Bittell fails to see into her picture.

21 Much of the pleasure of reading this story derives from Mrs Bittell’s repeated failure to imagine an homosexual relationship between her protégé and Rupert. Her most innocent statements, attitudes and perceptions therefore acquire an ironic dimension. For instance, she once says “I always understood Cupid was blind” (500). It is not Cupid who is blind but her own faulty construction of the relationship between Sidney and Rupert and by implication the whole process in the institution of subjectivity. Another example shows her attitude when Sidney starts crying because the beloved Rupert might have gone to the Bahamas. Mrs Bittell approaches the truth:

> The cry took her back years to a painful scene in Aldershot when a subaltern in her husband’s regiment had suddenly sobbed like this about some wretched girl. He had actually cried on her shoulder. Sidney did more than this; his head was on her bosom, weeping. His dark hair had a peculiar smell, just like the subaltern’s smell. She patted Sidney on the head, but she was thinking, I mustn’t tell my sister Dolly about this, or my daughters. It would be terrible if her grandson suddenly came; he often dropped in. (490-1)

22 Mrs Bittell is detracted from thinking about the passionate outburst by her self-consciousness and by the “inconvenience” (“she liked to say it was ‘inconvenient’”) of being seen by members of her family in such ambiguous posture, since for her Sidney is 'a man', whatever that concept might mean in the troubled times postmodernism has created by de-doxificating all stances.[12] ‘Man’ in this story is interestingly seen as a concept that is implicitly uncertain of its destiny or even presence. When Mrs Bittell’s prayer for the return of Rupert is answered, the young man is perceived as not quite the real thing, “For a moment the young man still looked unlike a real man but more like some photograph of a man” (497). So, is the real man the husband? Not so, says Mrs Bittell who not only had no real choice in the matter of her marriage but was hit on the head by a parasitical man who abandoned her “to play bridge with his military friends” (487). The pictures of gentlemen Mrs Bittell possesses as heirlooms also question what is handed down along generations:

> “Oh, that's the old judge. We call him the Judge–the red robe and the fur collar. It was from my mother's family”, said Mrs Bittell in a deprecating way. She had caught Sidney's taste for horrors: “I fear not a very nice man. They say he sentenced his own son to death.” (488)

23 The authoritarian and death-sentencing ancestor is akin to a memory Mrs Bittell has kept of her own father who shouted to her while fishing: “Keep your oars straight, girl” (487). Those straight and authoritarian images of symbolic fathers correspond to congealed pictures of history when men unconcerned with the throes of identity were “reckless plunderers of land, putting down rebellions, fighting wars, gambling and drinking away their money, building big houses, losing their land to lawyers and farmers, grabbing the money of their wives and quarrelling with their children” (489). Although the style and manner of this story places it in the realist tradition, the end resonates with true Derridean ‘destinerrance’ effects.[13] Rupert, the grandson, who bears the same Christian

name as her attacker, is absent when his aunt most wishes his presence to protect her. Rupert is absent while Rupert-the-robber has stolen Mrs Bittell’s valuable Psyche leaving behind an empty frame. Rupert is not there but Mrs Bittell in sheer panic keeps speaking to him as if he were in the room with her, “And called calmly, as if to her grandson, Rupert, there’s a man in my bedroom” (501). At the crucial moment the grandson is absent, and the man in the bedroom is not a real man being the photograph of a man. Like Edgar Allan Poe’s famous letter, Psyche’s image has been ‘purloined’ and another man who stands as a good equivalent of the lacanian subject-supposed-to-know who is in and who is out, the doorman, has unwittingly found a potential solution to the conception of hierarchical differences that hide between the in/out opposition and this is ‘in-disposition’:

> “A man called Sidney”, said the doorman, answering it [the telephone].”He’s asking for her.
> He turned to the crowd. “He says it's urgent.”
> No one replied.
> With pomp the doorman returned to the telephone and said, “Mrs Bittell is indisposed”. (502)

NOTES

1. Both papers can be found in P. Grice, *Studies in the Way of Words,* Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard U.P., 1989. Also of relevance to the study of the implicit are the following books: O. Ducrot, *Le Dire et le dit*, Paris: Minuit, 1994; J. Searle, *L'intentionalité*, Paris: Minuit, 1985; F. Récanati, *La Transparence et l'énonciation*, Paris: Seuil, 1979; J.-J. Lecercle, *La Violence du langage*, Trad. M. Garlati, Paris: Puf, 1996; C. Kerbrat-Orecchioni, *L'Implicite*, Paris: Armand Colin 1986; S. Levinson, *Pragmatics*, Cambridge: Cambridge U.P, 1983; M. Bertuccelli-Papi, *Implicitness in Text and Discourse,* Pisa: Edition ETS, 2000.

2. L. Sterne, *The Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy*, Hardmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1985, p. 127.

3. V.S. Prichett, *Collected Stories*, Harmondsworth:Penguin Books, 1984, p. 483-502.

4. “Tout ce qui est réel se suffit à lui-même. Par définition, le réel est plein”. J. Lacan, *La Relation d'objet, Le Séminaire, livre IV,* Paris: Seuil, 1994, p. 218.

5. I comment on V.S. Prichett’s style because in an interview he shows an acute concern about “poor slack English”: “when you're very young and write sentences which seem to hang like laundry on the line”. An Interview by B. Forkner and P. Séjourné, A Special V. S. Prichett Issue, *Journal of the Short Story in English*, n° 6, Spring 1986, p. 27.

6. S. Freud, *Jokes and their Relation to he Unconscious*, trans. J. Strachey, Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1981.

7. C. Grivel, *Production de l'intérêt romanesque*, La Haye, Mouton, 1973, p. 275. My translation.

8. R. Barthes, *Le Plaisir du texte*, Paris: Point-Seuil, 1973.

9. M. Bertuccelli-Papi, *Implicitness in Text and Discourse*, op. cit, p. 22.

10. “C'est qu’on ne peut dire *à la lettre* que ceci manque à sa place, que de ce qui peut en changer, c'est à dire du symbolique. “Le Séminaire sur ‘La Lettre Volée’”. *Ecrits* Paris: Seuil, 1966, p. 25.

11. P. Brooks, *Body Work, Objects of Desire in Modern Narrative*, Cambridge: Harvard U.P., 1993, p. 219.
12. For L. Hutcheon, “postmodernism works to ‘de-doxify’ our cultural representation”. *The Politics of Postmodernism*, London and New York, Routledge, 1991, p. 3.
13. J. Derrida, *La Carte postale*, Paris: Aubier-Flammarion, 1980.

ABSTRACTS

La catégorie de l'implicite est comparable à un feu-follet qui se déplace ou s'évanouit quand on cherche à l'approcher. Replié dans les articulations de la langue, l'implicite est aussi, à bien des égards, comme un diablotin malicieux qui refuserait de fournir des explications sur ses intentions. Les linguistes ont fait preuve de beaucoup d'adresse pour se saisir de ce diablotin et l'amener à révéler ses tours et détours. Un grand nombre de concepts sont issus des travaux des linguistes comme ‘l’indéfaisabilité’, ‘la présupposition’, ‘l’implicature’, ‘le non-dit’ pour n'en nommer que quelques uns. Nous voulons explorer ces concepts en les associant aux opérations de la construction du sens et lire une nouvelle de V. S. Prichett, “Tea with Mrs Bittell”.
Nous souhaitons réaliser une greffe entre ces concepts linguistiques et la définition que donne Lacan de la subjectivité. Lacan a analysé la subjectivité comme la résultante d'un processus instable impliquant le symbolique, le réel et l'imaginaire. Nous commencerons par délimiter des catégories temporaires comme 'l'implicite réel','l’implicite imaginaire’ et ‘l’implicite symbolique’ dans une tentative pour articuler différents niveaux de sens et dimensions de l'implicite.

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